CASE STUDY

ALABAMA STREET CORRIDOR FEASIBILITY STUDY AND SAFETY IMPROVEMENTS
BELLINGHAM, WASHINGTON

DESCRIPTION AND PURPOSE: The Alabama Street Corridor is a 1.75 mile stretch of major East-West commuter route that connects five neighborhoods in Bellingham. Consistently identified as a major barrier to mobility, this portion of Alabama Street experienced over 300 collisions in an 8 year period, 115 of which caused injury. The objective of the road improvements was to reduce the number of collisions, protect transit on-time performance, and ensure the safety of all users including vehicles, bikes and pedestrians in what has been an auto-dominated corridor since the sixties.

A 4-to-3 lane rechannelization was not considered feasible for the entire corridor when analysis showed that it would have negative impacts on the most productive year-round transit route and interfere with emergency services. Ultimately, the transit consideration as well as public misinformation and protest determined the specific changes that were made.

A hybrid 4-to-3-lane rechannelization (four lanes into two lanes, two bikes lanes and a center turn lane) was installed on parts of the corridor and a raised C-Curb median and turn lanes along other sections. The C-curb was preferred because the city’s emergency service vehicles can drive over them when needed. A heavily used left turn lane was lengthened to accommodate more vehicles which lengthened the pedestrian crossing by ten feet for three
blocks. Changes made include the installation of ADA ramps along sidewalks and six new High Intensity Activated Crosswalk signals which make crossing four lane road more safe without a center pedestrian refuge. Additionally, transit stops were moved closer to the crosswalks and 8 Bicycle Boulevards were installed to connect neighborhoods which were divided by the busy corridor. Finally, the speed limit was reduced to 30mph from 35mph.

CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS / COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT: After a misleading article was published in the local paper about the future of the Alabama Corridor, the public disapproved of C-curbs and were worried that the road diet would cause too much congestion. Picketing neighbors and community chatter increased the public’s involvement with the project and unhelpful media ultimately put enough pressure on City Council to remove the C-curb where it was needed to reduce collisions. Going forward, more data will be collected by the city to show where further improvements can be made and potentially reintroduce the C-curb idea to City Council.

COSTS AND FUNDING: The city received $1,362,000 to study methods to reduce vehicle collisions along this corridor. $1,461,824 in grants awarded to reduce collisions through the Highway Safety Improvement Program. An additional $1,900,000 in local street funding was provided to resurface Alabama street which was coincidentally due for maintenance and made accessing those funds possible. Total cost was $3,500,000.

Implementation time-frame: The Pedestrian Master Plan for Bellingham began in May 2011 in which Alabama was identified as a problem. The Whatcom Transportation Authority funded a study to reduce vehicle collisions and collision data was gathered from the Department of Transportation. Neighborhood meetings, open houses and public hearings happened throughout 2012-2014 until the City Council voted to approve safety improvements in June 2014. Road improvements were implemented in stages and finished in 2015.

BENEFITS AND RESULTS: The improvements made are intended to improve the quality of life for neighborhood residents and businesses. Voluntary transit ridership is expected to increase with the new placement of bus stops by crosswalks. The five neighborhoods are now reconnected and desireable to bike through as parts of the corridor now include designated bike lanes. Bellingham Public Works expects the number of collisions to decrease and expects to see an increase in pedestrian crossing and bike use.

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